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A Sheaf of Sonnets



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A SHEAF OF SONNETS

BY

JAMES COBOURG HODGINS



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PHILADELPHIA

*Not what the Artist wrought,
Not what the Singer trilled,
Not what the Seer foretold ;
But beauty still uncaught,
Heart-hunger still unfilled,
Vision no mind can hold.*



NIGHT AND THE STARS AND SILENCE.

Night and the stars and silence! World on world
Floating, how softly, in the seas of space!
Bright planet-ships which gliding leave no trace;
Into the luminous ether ever whirled
By Thee, Vast Spinner, at Thy ceaseless wheel,
To glow and mount and struggle back again
Through what vast rapture, through what priceless pain,
Ere soul from fire-mist will, and think, and feel!

What of the one small life, the one tense will,
The little heart-break, the slim tragedy,
The clinging love which passing, passes all!
What of man's hope, his momentary thrill
At sight of loveliness, felicity;
What of Thy Spirit's urgent, fiery call!



APART.

Let the hot combat call! I shall not heed.
Full well I know the reeling contest there :
The clash of steel on steel, the dust-filled air,
The loud huzzas, the victor and his deed.

Unlovely all! Oh, thrice unlovely then
The bubbling wine-cup, the cool banquet-hall,
The joy nursed on the bloody sweat of thrall,
Like brilliant scum upon a reeking fen!

Here in a quiet cloister, I, apart,
Muse oft upon a hidden treasure, sigh
With one who paced a Galilean wild.
Here with a few choice friends share I my heart.
The world cries "Failure!" as it hurries by.
Failure!—Dear God, at last I am Thy child!



AD DEUM.

I do not ask that Thou shouldst full reveal
The glory of Thy hiding place, or show
To my presumptuous eyes the bliss, the glow
Deific. Rather place thy heaviest seal
Upon that radiance which is all Thine own !
Keep me, oh Potter, to my lowly wheel !
Ward off my idle visions when I steal
Too close, heart-urged, to the eternal throne !

Yet death is terrible, and stern, and fain
I would escape his pitiless decree ;
Or, if I could, stretch hope beyond a dream.
Behold, this goodly earth holds many slain !
Many are stricken who in terror flee
They know not where, and love is not supreme.



THE CHRIST.

“ Let not your hearts be troubled : ye believe.”

Ah, how could hearts be troubled, Master, dear,
What time thy gracious countenance gave cheer
To longing souls who did from thee receive
Health, grace and up-lift, strength to fight, reprieve
From the tormenting devils born of fear,
From the vague future stretching blank and drear !
Thy passing near, what could they else but grieve !

It fares not so with us who toil to-day
To bring the blessed kingdom in. We fight
A vaster issue ; wider is the night
In which our souls must wander ; rough the way,
Nor flashes far the goal. Ah, that we might
Touch thee as those did, call thee Life and Light !



A MOOD.

A day of storm and wind, and then a calm ;
An olive-golden light athwart a stream ;
The foliage pierced by many a slender beam ;
And over all soft airs—God's healing balm.
Nature this day seems quiring some high psalm,
Such as rapt saint might hear, and hearing deem
That God was in his ecstasy, and dream,
And be transfigured, holding forth a palm.

I, pent in dusty streets, still feel the spell
Of that mild hour, its healthful influence
Vanishes not, but lingers on in sense
Like perfume sweet of flower in forest dell.
So should I wish when leaden grow these eyes,
To float, all tranquil, into Paradise.



CARPE DIEM.

All that men long for the gods laugh to scorn,
Knowing how little is required to give
Life's deepest peace. He who would truly live
Must dwell within, whence every joy is born.
Stand in the majesty of thine own power!
Look for no end beyond it—self's the whole!
Frail chrysalis, thou holdest all time's dower,
And each advance discovers but thy soul!

Now roses blazon in the summer's heat,
And all the hill-tops glow like amethyst;
Each Hamadryad hath by Faun been kissed,
Or waits his coming in a green retreat.
Why, when the gods an idle measure tread,
Should thankless man be envious of his dead?



OMAR KHAYYÁM.

In that dear land toward which each heart doth turn,
As in a dream I wandered wide and free.
On my enraptured ear the minstrelsy
Of Heaven smote: I saw the Seraph burn.
Before God's Throne a silver river ran
In gentle curves, and, on its placid breast
Full many a fragrant lily sank to rest,
And not a happy thing lay under ban.

And there, as on the earth, man talked with man.
And some said: "There is much beyond this state!"
And such with rheumy eyes did old scripts con.
Past these a troop of merry children ran
In hot pursuit of one who cried elate:
"Seize while you may—the caravan moves on!"



TO R. F. W.

We who the seas untried would blindly sail
Believing all is well ; with knowledge small
Of reefs and sunken shoals ; lured by some tall
And sun-lit summit—we who scorn to fail
Because the gushing fountain of our strength
Upholds and cheers us, O, how oft we veer
From the high calling which to faith shows clear !
How oft we journey scarce a cable's length !

When doubt arises and the sky grows dim,
And vague unrest perplexes our clear course,
Lo, on the shadowy verge we oft descry
Some lordlier vessel piercing to the rim
That margs glory. Straight we gather force
And follow after, urged by sea and sky.



COURAGE.

When envious tongues traduce and liars rage ;
When spleen is law and falsehood sits enthroned ;
When truth, the meek and patient one, is stoned,
And gains its sad and bitter heritage ;
When those called friends turn out but broken reeds ;
When selfishness unmask its cunning face ;
When unfaith triumphs to the man's disgrace,
And false love passes by a sore world's needs ;
Then may I travel inward to my soul,
And brood upon the sufferers of time past,
Thinking betimes : *How many failed of goal !*
How many more to rack and stake were cast !
How many died in bitterness unknown !
Who asked the world for bread and got—a stone !



SYMPATHY.

We build our little island-home, the wave
Plays lightly round each cove and tranquil bay.
"Thus shall it ever be for us," we say.
"Far roars the tempest! Here the waters lave
No wreck-strewn shore, but cream in lazy foam!
Never to us, isled in by perfect peace
Shall come the rack and fury! Here surcease
Of earth-born sorrow! Here our final home!"

But on a sudden the black waters roar:
Straight falls our fabric in the hissing brine.
In vain we scan the heavens for a sign;
No sign appears, and joy returns no more.
Then plead we from the depths of sorrow's psalm:
"Let, O dear God, all other seas be calm!"



“BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE.”

When rude man cowered before a world unknown,
And lifted up his hands in empty space,
Seeking by rite and slaughter to efface
His sense of guilt, love hid within his moan.
When to a lordlier stature he had grown,
And time had chiselled out a fairer face—
The splendid shadow of a coming grace—
Love, crowned as Art, sat mounted on the throne.

Behold him now as master of the world,
Rich with all learning, freighted down with spoil,
Knowing his soul—life's deepest mystery—
As gem in which all riches lie impearled!
Yet would his life be one of mocking toil
Devoid of love—God's fount of ecstasy.

1890.



THEOLOGICAL HOPE.

Once in a restless slumber filled with dreams
Methought I wandered in a desert land
Where hung a gibbous moon, where the hot sand
Was hell unto my feet. In death's extremes,
One came with courage in his eyes, and cheer
In voice, and promise of great aid from God.
Parched, faint and weary was I, but a laud
Broke from my heart, and dead lay every fear.

"Look at the gracious deeps of space!" he cried,
"Such is the love of God—unsearchable!
Beyond that burning ridge oases hide!"
Then I: "These visions but my thirst deride!
One cup of water, comrade!" and I fell—
He drank himself, and on the sands I died.

DESIDERATUM.

Lord, what am I among these flaming hosts!—
So small, I seem but dust and emptiness,
And as I ponder fade from less to less
Till thought sinks spent. No more for me vain boasts
Of ampler realms beyond and sunnier coasts
Where in immortal joy the soul shall press
To statelier tasks, and, freed from all distress,
Look back on earth as on a land of ghosts.

I know not what life's end, or where I go
What time this frame revert to parent clay;
Whether to deep sweet sleep or ampler day,
To joy unspeakable or keener throe.
What matter, if, when in the lists I fall,
From all I hate Thy Spirit me unthral!



FAITH.

Fret not, my soul, each star moves on its way,
And in the boundless ether none is lost.
The sea returns to calm though tempest-tost.
The roaring winds that mighty forests sway
Pipe first in calm, and in it lull away.
The flowers that shrivel in the autumn frost—
Their beauty purchased at too great a cost
To purblind eyes—but sleep, awaiting May.

There is no beauty cast to utter void.
There is no longing mocked by idle air:
No thought all-baffled in the eternal quest.
What crowns the pang can never be destroyed.
Chaos hints Cosmos, large, serene and fair.
Through strife and pain God's Better leads man's Best.

THE JEW.

God, the Eternal, from creation saw
What man, his darling, must through time endure;
Saw him in vision groping all unsure
With trembling steps up to the highest law.
And seeing, in His pity and His grace,
From the vast myriads called to life and light,
He fashioned Israel, and His great might
Took living shape in one weak, puny race.

Down through the ages marched the chosen seed
Trusting in God—wan, hungry, outcast, cursed—
Faith their sole stay; but to that faith how true!
O, parable in flesh which all shall heed!
Man, fainting in the presence of Hell's worst,
Take heart; before you stands the mighty Jew!



AT NIAGARA.

Here at this awful brink where Chaos throws
A harsh defiance to our stoutest hope,
And all man's aims seem pent in narrow scope—
Here where brute-matter deals its fiercest blows
At all we fain would hold inviolate,
I see how God doth all His creatures keep.
Lo, even at the curving, glassy leap
A tiny swallow dares its thirst to sate!

Dear bird, that drinkest at the source of strength
Unfearing, glad to slake thine urgent thirst,
The water's dreadful roar affrights thee not!
Ah, that I too, through some bright lure at length
May, even when the evil powers are worst,
Know but one need, and all else be forgot!



FRIEDLAND.

(AFTER MEISSONIER.)

The thunder of a hundred thousand horse
Rushing like driven leaves in autumn storms;
The blaze and glitter of proud uniforms;
The frenzied shouts that silence all remorse.
All tremulous, mad, save thou imperious one
Whose brow of gloom would fit a cynic well!
Those half-curled lips no inward rapture tell:
Calm art thou always, victor or undone.

This is the summit! On the topmost crest
Thy bark is riding now! The coast shows clear!
Yet in thy triumph dart strange gleams of fear,
For one small cloud keeps threatening in the west.
Methinks beyond this triumph thou dost see
An ocean strand, exile and misery.



SHAKSPEARE.

When earth was young and life was full and strong ;
When mystery lurked in every grove and stream,
And truth was what the poet saw in dream,
Blind Homer sang for youth a wondrous song.
When, 'neath a heavy burden of false fears,
Men staggered in the gloom, a fierce dark soul
Uprose, and Dante built into life's whole
His Hell of woe and bitterness and tears.

Then lest the world should sink to dull despair,
Like the great sun, burst Shakspeare's glowing mind,
Piercing the murky vapors that confined
Man's vision to the things of lower air.
Homer sings youth ; Dante the soul's fierce strife ;
But Shakespeare chants the choral hymn of life.



ON RECEIVING SOME VIOLETS FROM THE
GRAVE OF KEATS.

These from the grave of that young Titan-soul
Who fought all forces save Heaven's gift of song,
That, scattered in a prodigal waste along
A dreary highway full of death and dole.

Great spirit, moving now in gracious calm,
To whom the memory of the bitter years
Is as a shadowy dream that leaves mild tears,
Too late the race that crushed thee yields its palm!

Oh, not in vain, strong soul, thy weary strife,
Nor all in vain the death-damp and despair,
The bitterness, the agony, the scorn.
Thinking of thee full many a soul forlorn,
Conscious of yearning for a higher air,
Has nursed vast hopes, and conquered death in life.



A GREEK REVERIE.

This is the purple sea of ancient song.
These are the groves to which bacchantes lured.
In these grim rocks bad spirits are immured,
Pent in by Heaven in token of some wrong.
Sure, that was Pan who flashed by through the pine,
Followed by boys with passionate eyes, and men
Bedecked with roses! Fainter down the glen
Tramps the mad rabble, caught with song divine.

Now once again the Lord of life and day
Smites into splendor all the dull waste waves:
Straight Ulysses, his face sleep-swollen laves,
Rouses his heroes, and, with scant delay
Prows are turned homeward. Hark the measured beat!
Another weary day and vacant sky and heat!



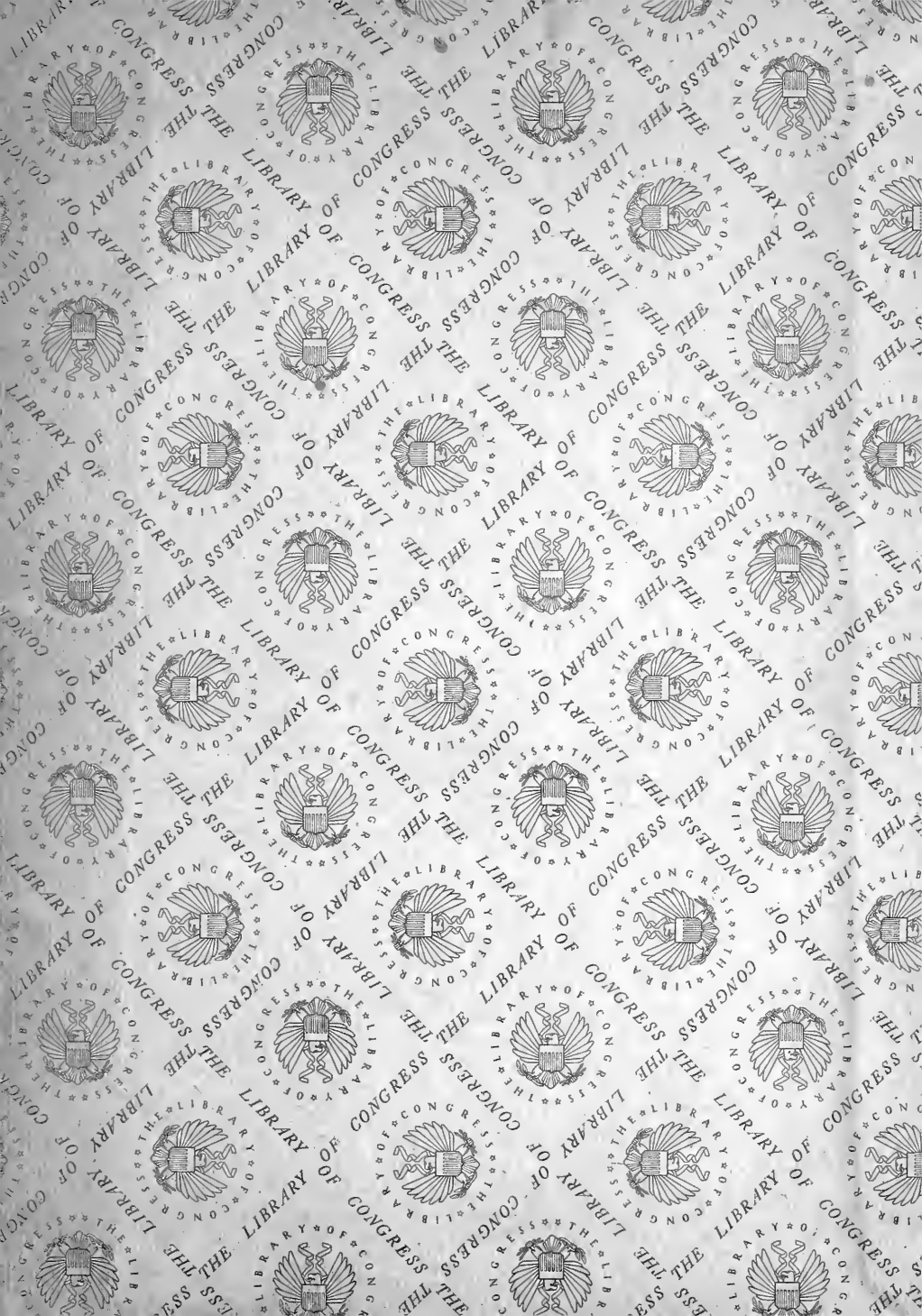












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